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ABSTRACT

For years, elementary school teachers taught writing by giving students a "story starter" and asking them to complete the composition. That blissful state of complacency in the teaching of writing was shaken in 1978, when Donald Graves advocated a radical departure from accepted pedagogy in his publication "Balance the Basics: Let Them Write." Rather than emphasizing the written product, he called for teachers to use a process/conference approach. Both students and teachers must understand what is meant by "writing process" if this different approach to teaching writing is to be implemented. The three phases of the writing process--prewriting, writing, and revision--must be explained to students so they will understand what behavior is expected of them as they engage in the process. Students will have to adjust to the lack of deadlines, and to the added responsibility they will be asked to assume. When using the writing process, each student will be writing about whatever he or she chooses. Students will have to use their own ideas, considering first what they know, then determining how to put it on paper effectively. Teachers can ease the transition from the known to the unknown by deliberately teaching these new expectations. (A beginning week's lesson plan for introducing the writing process and expectations is included.) (HTH)

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Introducing the Writing Process: New Procedures, New Expectations

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Introducing the Writing Process: New Procedures, New Expectations

For years, elementary school teachers knew how to teach writing. They wrote a story starter on the chalkboard and told the class it had thirty minutes to complete the composition. If students finished early they proofread their writing. Papers were collected to be graded by the teacher. When papers were returned to the students, they were either "taken home" (a euphemism for thrown away) or recopied. A language arts methods course could be evaluated by the length of the list of story starters the instructor had provided; a good writing in-service session provided novel topics to add to that list. New teachers had few apprehensions about teaching writing; they had experienced it all themselves as students.

That blissful state of complacency in the teaching of writing was shaken in 1978. The Ford Foundation published a paper on the teaching of writing which it had commissioned Donald Graves to author. What Graves advocated in Balance the Basics: Let Them Write was a radical departure from accepted pedagogy. Rather than emphasizing the written product, he called for teachers to use a process -- conference approach (Graves, 1978). Not since the modern math revolution in the 1960's had such a sweeping pedagogical change in an elementary school subject been advocated. Now a language arts methods course could be evaluated by how well the teacher candidates understood how to implement the writing

process; a good writing in-service session would provide information and support for teachers trying the new writing process techniques.

Curricular change is never easy. The abortive attempt to implement the "new math" in the elementary classroom of America is still vivid in many minds. Proponents of the writing process must be wiser than the mathematics experts were if innovation in teaching writing is to avoid a similar dismal fate. Fortunately, much more knowledge about how teachers and students function in classrooms is available today (Good and Brophy 1978). Agents of curricular change can draw on the proven importance of teacher expectations and student perceptions to facilitate successful implementation.

Both students and teachers must understand what is meant by "writing process" if a different approach to teaching writing in the elementary classroom is to be implemented. The three phases of the writing process, pre-writing, writing, and revision, need to be explained in such a way that students understand what type of behavior is expected as they engage in the process. To introduce the writing process effectively requires that teachers clearly communicate how the writing periods will change, what the teacher's idea of acceptable performance will be, and how the students' responsibilities will differ.

In some classrooms, writing on topics may have been a regular activity; in others more of the language arts instructional time

has been spent studying grammar and mechanics from a textbook. In either case, children need to know that the language periods are going to be different when the writing process is being implemented. Now, there will be a time (daily if possible) when each child will be involved in the writing process and during which the teacher will conference with students. What may be totaliy new to the students is the latitude of acceptable behavior implicit in the writing process. To the child, writing has meant picking up a pencil to produce words on paper; now formulating ideas by sitting quietly thinking or talking to a partner will be part of writing period. Indeed, more time may be spent at that step of the process than in actual pencil pushing. Particularly for intermediate grade children, that is not what they have been taught to do during the writing period.

Another change that the experienced school-goer will need to adjust to is the lack of deadlines. The teacher will no longer demand that a paper be turned in at the end of each period. This is a clear departure from normal expectations. Dolores Durkin, in her observational research study of the teaching of reading comprehension, found that completing assignments was of great importance in all the elementary classrooms visited (Durkin, 1978-79). Another researcher (Anderson, 1981) found that even first graders say teachers believe that it is most important that school work be completed. Perhaps teachers do not intend to communicate the message that turning

in a paper is the top priority; but children hear the common exhortations to have assignments finished by recess, or by lunchtime, or before school is out, and they quickly experience the consequences of losing free time privileges if they fail to produce. Poor quality of work results in far fewer immediate negative consequences than does poor quantity. Turning in papers on a set schedule, having the papers evaluated by the teacher, and receiving the papers back is a pattern that has become engrained in children early in their school careers. Using the writing process will result in classroom practices that run totally counter to that accepted standard.

Contributing further to the disorientation will be the added responsibility which the student will be asked to assume. When using the writing process, each person will be writing about whatever he or she chooses; not everyone in the room will be required to write on the same topic at the same time. Children must use their own ideas, considering first what it is they know, then determining how to put it on paper effectively. For children who are accustomed to the teacher putting the topic on the board, assigning a textbook page, or passing out a ditto story starter, this can be a difficult task. Children must be taught how to select topics of their own, and teachers must be patient while children struggle to take on this new obligation.

Teachers can ease the transition from the known to the unknown

by deliberately teaching the new expectations. A beginning week's plans for introducing the writing process that follow illustrate such an approach.

Direct Instruction on Understanding the Writing Process:

Procedures for the First Week

First Day: Introducing the Writing Process

I. Put the word WRITING on the board. Discuss with the class what it means to them.

II. Add the word PROCESS. Discuss with the class what it means to them. Make the distinction between process and product. Relate to cooking, baking, etc.

III. Explain what the expectations will be for the writing period. I won't expect you to finish a story each day. I won't expect you to spell every word right, or to punctuate perfectly, or to have beautiful handwriting as you work.

but

I will expect you to be working on some part of the writing process each period. I will expect you to THINK about what you write.

IV. Define the Writing Process. (Put on chart

for use over period of time.) Discuss and illustrate what each item means. Emphasize the importance of thinking.

The Writing Process

1. Pre-writing
   a. Discuss with someone else
   b. Think by yourself
   c. Jot down ideas
2. Writing
   a. Skip lines
   b. Keep big margins
   c. Circle words that you guess how to spell
3. Revision
   a. Re-write your story
   b. Make any changes to make it better

Note: Revision was kept simple on the original chart. After children write fluently, present additional details on how to revise.

V. Provide a writing opportunity to encourage children to think. Model a "Who am I?" paragraph about someone they all know, but use clues that are indirect. After the

children read yours and discuss how they decoded the clues, have them THINK about how they could write one about themselves. Remind class to THINK first (Pre-writing), then practice the guidelines from the chart for Writing. Review those three behaviors. Tell the class that you will read their "Who am I?" papers tomorrow for others to guess who wrote it.

VI. While children write, pass out writing folders, which will be used to store all pieces of writing. Have them put their work in it.

Second Day: Reviewing the Writing Process and Introducing Topic Selection

I. Review the writing process by writing the children's remembrances of the major steps on the board. Number them: 1. Pre-writing, 2. Writing, and 3. Revision. Then ask the children questions from yesterday's chart, such as:

When do we skip lines?

When do we discuss with someone?

When do we circle words we aren't sure

how to spell? (Etc.)

Ask the children to respond by holding up 1, 2, or 3 fingers. If they have difficulty remembering, show them the chart to check their responses.

II. On the inside cover of the folder, have children write the heading, "Things I Can Write About." Ask children to jot down any ideas they get so that they will have topics to refer to when they start a new piece of writing. Emphasize that in the writing process they will be responsible for thinking about what they want to write about.

III. Read the "Who Am I?" selections. Have class guess who wrote it. Discuss any topics that are mentioned that that person could write about. Ask children to have a minimum of 4 topics listed for tomorrow.

Third Day: Modeling Pre-Writing

I. Discuss what part of the writing process the selection of topics would be. Model how to take a topic to develop it into the framework for a piece of writing by selecting

something you could write about. Solicit questions from the class -- ex., If I wanted to write a story about my dog, what questions could you ask me to help me get my ideas together? Jot possible ideas on the board. Share anecdotes on your topic. Discuss if they would make a good story.

Fourth Day: Reviewing Writing Process, Modeling Pre-Writing Partners, and Starting Writing

I. Make sentence strips for the lines on the Writing Process chart.

II. Model how to work with a writing partner during pre-writing. Pre-arrange to have some child be your partner; take one of the child's topics; ask questions to help the child develop his/her ideas; have the child jot down key words that will help him/her remember what you talked about.

III. Divide class into writing partners. Have person star the topic they like best. Partners then ask each other questions, help each other organize ideas.

IV. Students begin writing individual stories. Remind them to follow the guidelines under

Writing on the Writing Process chart. Emphasize that the piece of writing is NOT due at the end of the period. They can and should continue it the next day. Encourage them to do additional pre-writing (thinking about their writing) for homework.

Fifth Day: Getting the Process Rolling

I. Review the expectations from First Day Lesson, Part III.

II. On board list what students are to do:

1. Continue writing the piece you started yesterday.

2. If you finish, do one of the following:

Re-read your story; make it better. Write between the lines, cross out, add words, etc.

Choose a new topic to write about. Talk to your partner if s/he's available, or think alone.

Start writing a new story.

III. Conference with children; circulate around the room, talking briefly with students.

IV. At end of period, review how many followed guidelines for writing from the Writing

Process chart. Ask students to tell the topics they are writing about. Encourage others to add any topics to their folders that they can think of while the class is sharing.

Student teachers and experienced teachers in the Sunnyside School District, Tucson, Arizona have used variations of the suggested plan successfully with children ranging from second-semester second grade to sixth grade. They have found that teaching the children the new procedures not only clarifies their own understanding of how to implement the writing process, but also gives the children confidence that they can meet the new expectations. Following a plan for one week is no guarantee that the writing process will be implemented well during an entire school year; teacher and class have much to learn. However, it does provide a framework upon which they can build a mutually satisfactory transition from viewing writing as a product to perceiving writing as a process.

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